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## A Content Analysis of Women's Experiences of Workplace Bullying Since 2000

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**Abstract:** Bullying has been a serious social issue in contemporary society. Although bullying typically has a negative connotation with a childhood developmental issue, which has been believed to improve and disappear when a child becomes an adult, adulthood bullying also exists and affects adults at work. Traditionally, bullying has been examined in various social contexts and different populations. However, there has not been much research that specifically focuses on women and women's experiences at work. The purpose of this study was to understand women's experiences of workplace bullying by conducting a content analysis. Discussion of the findings from the content analysis and implications for research and practice for adult, higher, and workplace education will be provided.

**Keywords:** adult bullying, content analysis, women, workplace bullying

Bullying among adults has been an endemic phenomenon in contemporary society. According to the 2017 *Workplace Bullying Institute U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey* that was conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) in June 2017, nineteen-percent of Americans are bullied at work, another 19% witnessed workplace bullying, and 61% percent of Americans are aware of abusive conduct in the workplace. Workplace bullying affects at least 60 million Americans. This is not surprising because research shows bullying affects people from childhood to late adulthood (Misawa & Rowland, 2015). Research also reported that bullying can happen to anyone at any time in their lives and at any place where power dynamics exist (Lines, 2008; Misawa, 2015). Power dynamics at work do not simply refer to organizational statuses or positions but to the positionality of people there. It is positionality that primarily influences how bullying presents itself at the workplace.

All levels of our society, including workplaces, have been encouraging and pursuing diversity and gender equality in recent years, and bullying has noticeably revolved around gender. For example, in a special issue of *Adult Learning* journal published on academic bullying and incivility in adult, higher, continuing, and professional education edited by Misawa and Rowland (2015), the majority of the peer reviewed articles (four out of six) revolve around gender issues that describe “mean girls” and bullying. In addition, WBI (2017) reported that 70% of perpetrators of workplace bullying are men and 60% of targets are women. About 67% of bullying is female perpetrators targeting other females. So, this type of intra-gender bullying among women needs to be understood more to guide efforts to reduce bullying.

Although there have been studies about workplace bullying that factor in gender, there is no comprehensive content analysis of workplace bullying that specifically focuses on women. The purpose of this research was to understand women’s experiences of workplace bullying by conducting a content analysis. This study focused on workplace bullying literature published between 2000 and 2017, which contained over 180 peer-reviewed published journal articles. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the characteristics of workplace bullying based on gender?
2. In what ways does workplace bullying influence women’s lives in the workplace?
3. What are the strategies that women use to respond to workplace bullying?

In the subsequent sections, the methodology of the data collection and the brief literature review based on more than 180 of those peer-reviewed published articles is presented in themes as the results of this content analysis study. In addition, possible implications for adult education theory and practice will be provided.

### **Review of the Relevant Literature**

Attell, Kummerow-Brown, and Treiber (2017) suggest that women are impacted by workplace bullying more than their male counterparts. These authors posit that “this disparity indicates that gender is a critical factor in how workplace bullying manifests and how employees interpret that bullying” (p. 212). As such, this content analysis will use critical inquiry and feminism as interpretive frameworks to understand women’s experiences of workplace bullying, which could be mediated by power of imbalance, inequalities, and culture within the workplace. This review covers the background and description of bullying, then turns more closely to examine bullying as it relates to gender, specific to women.

Scholars maintain that bullying can happen to any individual and in any context, where there are actual or perceived power imbalances (Attell et al., 2017; Misawa, 2015). Sedivy-

Benton, Strohschen, Cavazos, and Boden-McGill (2015) suggest that bullying incidences (subtle and blatant) occur frequently. In fact, they believe bullying includes “repetitive actions with the desire to cause physical, emotional, or social distress” (p. 36). Minimizing bullying is possible; however, the first step is admitting that bullying exists within the climate and that it is affected by positionalities of societal hierarchies based on but not including gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (Misawa, 2015).

Wang and Hsieh (2016) assert that bullying poses a significant threat to individuals based on positionality and “carry a higher risk of being socially excluded” from the dominant population (p. 632). Abed, Morris, and Sobers-Grannum (2016) found that being a woman was a significant predictor of workplace bullying. Members of minority populations like women are considered susceptible targets of bullying because they are perceived as being weak, powerless, and defenseless within non-minority populations (Sedivy-Benton et al., 2015).

Workplace bullying impacts women worldwide, with a broad range of health, social, and economic issues (Van De Griend & Messias, 2014). When considering gender, women’s experiences of bullying manifest as visible (physical) and/or invisible (psychological) consequences (Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016). Giorgi, Leon-Perez, and Arenas (2015) also found that women experienced more severe psychological health consequences than men, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Attell et al. (2017) found that the effects of workplace bullying are heavier for women, and that women experience less social support from co-workers. Olsen, Overland, Reme, and Lovvik (2015) found that women who experienced workplace bullying complained of common mental disorders and physical strain. According to the *U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey*, it is believed that at least 40% of targets experienced negative health consequences, but personal shame kept them from sharing about their health consequences with co-workers (WBI, 2017).

Coping strategies also differed for women. Lester (2009) shared that women faculty used avoidance as their typical coping response to bullying. MacIntosh, Wuest, Gray, and Cronkhite (2010) found that women had coped with workplace bullying by withdrawal or disengagement. In a study by Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason (2012), African-American women coped by walking away, prayer, and controlling the pace of stressors. Johnson-Bailey (2015) told her own story of workplace bullying in academia and how she coped with being bullied by her students with the use of humor and direct examples. A phenomenological study by Sedivy-Benton et al. (2015) found that women’s coping responses enforce a culture of silence that includes denial of bullying behaviors and actions.

## **Method**

In order to explore women's experiences of workplace bullying, a content analysis of academic literature focused on bullying towards women in the workplace was conducted. To start, we limited our search parameters by (1) databases, (2) type of articles, and (3) publication dates. The first search parameter limited our search of peer reviewed journal articles to six specific electronic databases, which included Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Education Source, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO. In the second search parameter, we chose articles that were published in scholarly (peer-reviewed) journals because we presumed that, in academic publication, each article went through the rigorous process and met the standards that were established for the given discipline. Our search incorporated empirical and theoretical articles on bullying of women in the workplace. We did not include any articles from dissertations or theses. The latter search parameter included peer reviewed publication articles that were published from January 2000 until December 2017. These specific publication dates were chosen to illustrate that the literature on women's experiences of workplace bullying increased exponentially over the late eighteen years.

Bounded by our search parameters, we combined the term bullying with various gender terms (i.e. women, females, non-male employees, gender bias, and gender) and various workplace terms (i.e. work, employment, industry, organization, business, academia). Our search yielded a total of 182 peer-reviewed published journal articles from various disciplines such as higher education, nursing, business, counseling, psychology, and medical as well as various countries like the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden. We reviewed and analyzed all of the 182 peer-reviewed publications by focusing on the major sections like titles, abstracts, keywords, and body.

To be included as a part of the content-analysis study, the peer-reviewed publication articles had to focus specifically on women's experiences of bullying within the workplace. Based on our criteria, 53 peer reviewed publication articles were eligible for this study, and we used them to come up with the common themes.

## **Findings**

After conducting the content analysis process, several characteristics and commonalities emerged among the articles. We found four main themes from our content analysis: 1) women's health, 2) social relationship, 3) work environment, and 4) victimization. The following subsections will address those themes in more detail.

Table 1. Peer-Reviewed Published Journal Articles on Workplace Bullying and Women between 2000 and 2017

Peer-Reviewed Published Journal Articles		n (%)
Total		<b>53 (100)</b>
Type		
	Conceptual	6 (11)
	Empirical	47 (89)
Location		
	US	24 (45)
	Non-US	29 (55)
Methodology		
	Quantitative	<b>27 (51)</b>
	Database	5 (9)
	Survey	22 (42)
	Qualitative	<b>20 (38)</b>
	Autoethnography	2 (4)
	Generic Qualitative	5 (9)
	Grounded Theory	6 (11)
	Narrative Case Study	5 (9)
	Phenomenology	2 (4)
	Conceptual	<b>6 (11)</b>
	Theoretical Analysis	6 (11)

Table 1 shows a descriptive classification of our content analysis including the type of the articles that we reviewed, the location of the study either in the US or outside of the US, and the methodologies that were used to frame the studies. From our analysis, there were more empirical articles that focused on women and workplace bullying. Most of the articles were research-based to show how women experienced workplace bullying. There were various research methodologies that were used to study women's experiences of workplace bullying. Over half of the eligible articles (51%) were quantitative in nature that utilized both survey research and large national and international longitudinal data. Some of them addressed their countries' national databases to make a case that women had experienced severe negative relational and work experiences so that policymakers could make sound recommendations to create safer and optimal work environments for women. There were also quantitative and

conceptual pieces that discussed workplace bullying and female gender from constructionist and subjectivist perspectives.

Table 2 presents the findings from our content analysis, which focused on the major sections like titles, abstracts, keywords, and body. Four main themes emerged from the content analysis: 1) women's health, 2) social relationship, 3) work environment, and 4) victimization.

Table 2: Themes from the Content Analysis

Peer-Reviewed Published Journal Articles			n (%)
Total			<b>53 (100)</b>
Content	Theme 1	Women's Health	24 (45)
	Theme 2	Social Relationship	24 (45)
	Theme 3	Work Environment	36 (68)
	Theme 4	Victimization	25 (47)

The content analysis revealed that women experience workplace bullying in different ways. In particular, women tend to appreciate relationships between and among women in a context of workplace, which is traditionally supported by Feminist Theory. And, this still occurs at contemporary workplaces. Some of the victims in the articles emphasized health and coping strategies such as support systems, organizational advocacy, and policies to reduce and eliminate workplace bullying.

### Discussion and Implications

To understand women's experiences of bullying in the workplace, we examined the characteristics, influences, and strategies women used to respond to workplace bullying. We examined 53 peer-reviewed published journal articles to gain a better understanding of how researchers and practitioners can use this information for adult educational theory and practice. They can use these themes to develop future empirical studies to investigate how the gender-based workplace bullying impacts the physical and psychosocial spaces and to help our society to pursue a democratic and inclusive environment for women and ultimately for all.

To decrease and alleviate bullying, adult educators can develop and disseminate training programs in workplace environments based on the findings of the current study. They can help draft anti-bullying policies that clarify guidelines and standards of behavior for provision of supportive leaders and reasonable workloads. They can implement support groups that encourage discourse, assertiveness, and problem-solving in an environment where bullying is unacceptable. Ultimately, these types of training programs and practices will reduce and eliminate these malicious behaviors among adults in the workplace.

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